University of Groningen

Gossip as a resource

Martinescu, Elena; Janssen, Onne; Nijstad, Bernard

Published in:
Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

DOI:
[10.1016/j.obhdp.2019.05.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2019.05.006)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Martinescu, E., Janssen, O., & Nijstad, B. (2019). Gossip as a resource: How and why power relationships shape gossip behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 153, 89-102.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2019.05.006>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Gossip as a resource: How and why power relationships shape gossip behavior[☆]

Elena Martinescu^{a,*}, Onne Janssen^b, Bernard A. Nijstad^b

^a King's Business School, King's College London, United Kingdom

^b Department of Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior, University of Groningen, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Gossip entails spreading evaluative information about people who are not present. From a social exchange perspective, we examined how hierarchical power relationships shape individuals' gossip motives and behavior. Results of a laboratory experiment (Study 1) partially supported our prediction that gossip is less likely and elaborate in downward compared to upward and lateral interactions. We further predicted that people gossip laterally to seek information and social support, and upwards to exert influence. A scenario (Study 2) and critical incident study (Study 3) with working populations showed that lateral gossip was more functional for *seeking information* and *expressive social support*, whereas upward gossip (Study 2) and upward and lateral gossip (Study 3) were more functional for *exerting informal influence* and for *seeking instrumental support*. These results confirm our notion that gossip is functional behavior that enables individuals in hierarchical power relationships to strategically exchange different social resources (i.e., information, influence, support).

1. Introduction

Gossip occurs during informal social interactions, in which people exchange positive or negative evaluative information about others who are not present (Foster, 2004). With reports showing that gossip takes more than two thirds of conversation time (Dunbar, Duncan, & Marriott, 1997; Emler, 1994), gossip is a universal human behavior, documented across cultures and contexts, intrinsic to social and organizational life (Dunbar, 2004). Research has shown that this is the case because gossip is highly functional to individuals in a social system such as an organization (e.g., Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004). In line with social exchange theory (SET; Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Foa & Foa, 1980; Gouldner, 1960), gossip can be conceptualized as an exchange of social resources (Rosnow, 2001). There is emerging consensus regarding the functionality of gossip in exchanging at least three distinct social resources: people engage in gossip to *exchange information* (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012), to *influence* their conversation partners (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012; Sommerfeld, Krambeck, & Milinski, 2008; Wert & Salovey, 2004), and to develop social bonds and trust relationships which provide *social support* (Bosson, Johnson, Niederhoffer, & Swann, 2006; Rosnow, 2001). Thus, from a social exchange perspective, gossip is motivated by exchanging important social resources.

Gossip is by definition a relational process, allowing individuals to

interact and exchange resources with members of their social environment in a spontaneous, informal, and unscripted manner (Emler, 1994). However, previous research has not assessed how the functionality and prevalence of gossip depend on specific features of the exchange relationship between interaction partners. This is unfortunate, because the functionality of gossip for exchanging social resources may be contingent on the nature of the relationship between the gossipers and the gossip receiver, and therefore could make gossip behavior more or less likely. We focus specifically on the role of hierarchical power in shaping gossip exchanges, because the power hierarchy is one of the most fundamental features of social relations in organizations. The power hierarchy refers to a system that ranks people according to relative authority – which prescribes roles and modes of conduct, and shapes mindsets and perceptions (e.g., Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Because of these pervasive effects of hierarchical power on exchange relations, it is likely that power relationships between individuals influence their gossip motives and behavior. Although some anecdotal evidence suggests that individuals in lower power positions (are believed to) gossip more abundantly than their higher power counterparts (e.g., Bergmann, 1993; Clegg & van Iterson, 2009; Farley, 2011; Scott, 1985; Wert & Salovey, 2004), previous research has not systematically examined the relation between hierarchical power and gossip behavior, and we currently know little about the mechanisms that drive the effect of hierarchical power on gossip.

[☆] **Note:** Data and materials for all three studies are openly available: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1q2jRohUJAtjmsRHDbq0oPkIDB9o94L5X>.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: elena.martinescu@kcl.ac.uk (E. Martinescu).

We propose that the hierarchical power relationship people have with their interaction partner (i.e., downward, lateral, or upward) will influence the motivation to exchange certain social resources, and thus constrain their actual engagement in gossip with that particular individual. Specifically, because powerful people can rely on their formal power resources to control their social environment, downward gossip (towards less powerful receivers) has low value for providing information, gaining influence, or support from others; therefore, downward gossip may be an inefficient, or even harmful form of social exchange. Lateral and upward gossip may be more functional than downward gossip, but for different reasons. In upward relationships, people may gossip to inform and thereby *influence* their higher power conversation partner, who has formal control over resources and the authority to take action (Stamkou, van Kleef, Homan, & Galinsky, 2016). In lateral relationships, however, in which peers are equally dependent on one another (Molm, 1991), gossip may have high functionality for gaining *information* and social *support*, because the mutual dependence facilitates exchange of resources on a reciprocal basis (e.g., Gouldner, 1960). Although we believe our predictions would hold for both positive and negative gossip, we focus on negative gossip, which is more socially undesirable, more risky, and more rewarding for the gossipers, and has a stronger impact on the well-being of individuals involved in the gossip process and their group (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Burt, 2008; Ellwardt, Labianca et al., 2012; Ellwardt, Wittek et al., 2012; Wert & Salovey, 2004).

In sum, by integrating theories of social exchange, gossip, and power, our study contributes to a better understanding of how and why hierarchical power relationships shape individuals' gossip motives and behaviors. This generates new insights on how the functionality of gossip (as an exchange of social resources) depends on the specific power relationship between gossipers and gossip recipient: lateral gossip is functional especially in seeking information and support, whereas upward gossip is functional in exerting informal influence over the gossip recipient.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Hierarchical power and gossip

According to Social Exchange Theory (SET), relationships involve the exchange of valued resources, such as love (affection or warmth), status, information, money, goods, and services (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Foa & Foa, 1980; Gouldner, 1960). These exchange processes are guided by certain rules or norms, the most important of which is reciprocity. Reciprocity involves interdependent social exchange, in which the actions of one actor lead to the response of another actor, usually in the form of “repayment in kind” (e.g., Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). SET proposes that through (reciprocal) exchange processes, people build social relationships based on trust and commitment (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961). It further proposes that people are willing to engage in social exchange to the degree that the benefits of exchange outweigh the costs for all actors involved (Baldwin, 1978; Molm, Peterson, & Takahashi, 1999). From this perspective it follows that, if gossip is seen as a form of social exchange (Rosnow, 2001), people are willing to engage in it when they perceive the benefits of gossip to be higher than its costs. Through such social exchanges, individuals can access “social goods”, such as information about others, influence over others, and a social network that can offer support (e.g. Fine & Rosnow, 1978).

Because power influences the interdependence structure among actors, social interactions and exchange relations in organizations are influenced by power relationships (e.g., Baldwin, 1978; Molm, 1991). Power represents the asymmetrical control over valued resources in the context of social relations (Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Magee & Galinsky, 2008), granting the more powerful individuals influence over others (French & Raven, 1959; Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, &

Liljenquist, 2008). Power is inherently relational, because lower power individuals depend on higher power individuals to obtain rewards and avoid punishments (Anderson & Brion, 2014; Emerson, 1962), thereby putting the powerless in a state of asymmetrical dependence on the powerful (Galinsky et al., 2008; Keltner et al., 2003). Moreover, power is relative, in the sense that people may have different power relationships with different individuals (e.g., supervisors may have high power in relation to subordinates, but low power in relation to their superiors), and may experience psychological states and display specific behaviors that are activated by the power relation. We thus conceptualize the power of individuals as *relative* to their interaction partner, and construe hierarchical power relationships as upward (one has lower power than one's interaction partner), lateral (interaction partners have the same level of power), and downward (one has higher power than one's interaction partner).

Powerful individuals have higher access to valuable resources in comparison to less powerful people, are less dependent on others, and experience higher personal autonomy and control over their own and others' outcomes (Anderson & Brion, 2014; Keltner et al., 2003). Furthermore, powerful people pay less attention to lower power interaction partners than vice-versa (Magee & Smith, 2013). Because powerful people can exert formal control over resources in downward interactions, they can afford to remain relatively unaware of the perspectives and actions of lower-power partners. Research also suggests that power salience increases social distance towards others, making individuals feel self-sufficient and satisfied with working alone rather than with others (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2012). Other studies show that power makes people feel less lonely (Waytz, Chou, Magee, & Galinsky, 2015), and reduces their desire for contact with subordinates (Kipnis, 1972).

Because relative power between individuals influences the value and appeal of their social interactions, power relationships are likely to influence perceptions of gossip as a favorable resource exchange. In downward interactions, powerful individuals tend to keep distance from subordinates and use formal power prerogatives to exercise influence and control over others (e.g., Keltner et al., 2003; Galinsky et al., 2008), making them less dependent on informal gossip for gaining information, influence, and support. Indeed, downward gossip may even damage higher power individuals' reputation and cause their higher status to “leak” towards the less powerful (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Podolny, 2005), which presents another reason to avoid this behavior. Furthermore, even when high power actors engage in downward gossip, they may only share gossip that is relatively low in elaboration. Gossip communicates descriptive information about the gossip target's characteristics and behaviors, but also has an evaluative component, which places the descriptive information about the target within a moral or normative framework, thereby affecting the target's reputation (Bergmann, 1993; Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Rosnow, 2001). Gossip elaboration therefore represents both description and evaluation of target's behavior (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994).

Hypothesis 1. Downward gossip is less likely to occur and is less elaborate than lateral or upward gossip.

2.2. Hierarchical power and gossip motives

Gossip is an accessible and functional strategy to exchange social resources (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004). Specifically, there is clear consensus in the gossip literature that individuals can use gossip to access and validate information about critical affairs in their social environment (Baumeister et al., 2004), to influence others' impressions about gossip targets and about themselves (Beersma & van Kleef, 2011; Feinberg et al., 2012; Wert & Salovey, 2004), and to develop bonds and trust relationships that provide support (Bosson et al., 2006). We propose that information, influence, and social support are social resources that individuals exchange in gossip

interactions. Specifically, we predict that lateral and upward gossip are more prevalent and elaborate than downward gossip, but they are motivated by the exchange of different social resources.

2.2.1. Information

To function effectively in a complex social environment, like the modern workplace, individuals need to collect and validate information about others around them (Foster, 2004). However, because information in organizations tends to be communicated in a top-down manner, employees are unlikely to fully understand events or developments in their environment by relying solely on formal communication. To avoid experiences of uncertainty and threat, people can supplement incomplete information with news obtained informally through gossip, which is an accessible channel of information (Baumeister et al., 2004; Mills, 2010; Wert & Salovey, 2004). As such, people are motivated to use gossip as a means for accessing and validating information about social targets (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Foster, 2004). Gossipers can compare their observations and opinions and form more accurate impressions of others around them (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

Negative information is especially important in helping individuals form a more accurate impression about targets, decode their self-presentation efforts, and assess their true intentions and trustworthiness (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Mills, 2010). Furthermore, negative gossip helps people learn social norms and understand potential consequences of breaking them (Baumeister et al., 2004). By evoking social comparisons with their targets, gossip helps people learn from others' experiences, understand what is expected of them, and what is the cost of misbehavior (Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2014; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Information gained through gossip is also crucial during organizational entry and organizational change, because it clarifies rules, expectations, and ways of working, reduces role conflict, and provides a framework for interpreting feedback (Miller & Jablin, 1991). Moreover, the "corporate culture" in organizations is commonly expressed in gossip stories (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Therefore, as a mechanism of observational learning, gossip enables people to acquire knowledge about the group goals, values, and norms, and ultimately understand their social environment (Baumeister et al., 2004).

From a social exchange perspective, obtaining information through gossip implies that interaction partners are willing and able to mutually exchange valuable information. However, hierarchical power relations influence the benefit-cost ratio of gossiping and may therefore constrain one's motivation to engage in gossip interactions. First, people are interested in seeking information from others who are perceived as knowledgeable. Because in *downward* interactions the powerful are likely to objectify others, rely on stereotypes about them, and ignore their perspectives and emotions, especially if they are not instrumentally useful for achieving salient goals (Keltner et al., 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008), the powerful are less likely to be interested in the insights offered by their lower-power conversation partners. Thus, seeking information by gossiping downwards has low exchange value. Second, gossip may provide information only to the extent that one's conversation partner is willing to reciprocate and also share information. In *upward* interactions, low power individuals may expect that their high power conversation partner will not feel compelled to spend their time to help them analyze, understand, and interpret behavior of gossip targets. Thus, because hierarchical interactions are characterized by asymmetrical dependence, they lead to perceptions of low ability (in the case of subordinates) or willingness (in the case of superiors) to exchange valuable information through gossip.

In lateral power relationships, in contrast, which are characterized by mutual dependence (Molm, 1991) and reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), people may be both able and willing to exchange information. One's peers have similar experiences and valuable insights to share about one's social environment, and may also be willing to do so, with the

expectation that the information exchange is reciprocal and relevant to both conversation partners.

Hypothesis 2a. People have a higher motive to seek information in lateral interactions compared to downward or upward relationships.

Hypothesis 2b. Seeking information mediates the effect of hierarchical power on gossip occurrence and elaboration.

2.2.2. Influence

Individuals can exert influence over others in their network simply by communicating a message (Scherer & Cho, 2003). Gossip may be motivated by the opportunity to pass on information about organizational members in order to influence interaction partners' impressions, attitudes, and behaviors towards the target in a desired way (Feinberg et al., 2012; Fine & Rosnow, 1978; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). People talk to others when they think they can influence or change opinions (Festinger et al., 1948), and the more people gossip, the more informal influence they have in the eyes of others (Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell, & Labianca, 2010). Gossip communicates one-sided opinions and constrains recipients to support the point of the gossip without challenge (Eder & Enke, 1991), because gossipers try to ensure that their own interpretation of a situation prevails (Paine, 1967). As an informal way of exerting influence, gossip represents a valuable resource, especially for people who lack formal means (i.e., power resources) of influencing their interaction partners.

There are several reasons why people are motivated to influence others through negative gossip. First, negative gossip is valuable in exerting social control, by exposing others who pursue selfish interests. By harming targets' reputation, gossipers indirectly pressure them to behave cooperatively and respect group norms (2016; Baumeister et al., 2004; Dunbar, 2004; Feinberg et al., 2012; Foster, 2004; Wert & Salovey, 2004; Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2015). Second, people may exploit accumulated information to influence recipients for self-enhancement (Dunbar, 2004; McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007; Rosnow, 2001). Negative gossip is a way of presenting oneself to gossip recipients as a qualified judge (Amabile, 1983), which may increase one's status and informal influence (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Gossipers boost or protect their reputation by making implicit social comparisons between themselves and targets (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Third, negative gossip can be construed as a form of aggression against targets (e.g. McAndrew, 2014; Stirling, 1956). Negative gossip is a source of informal power (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), which provides individuals with a degree of control over their work environment, by exposing, challenging, or undermining targets in the eyes of interaction partners (Ellwardt, Wittek et al., 2012; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Sommerfeld et al., 2008). Thus, individuals may have a variety of reasons for influencing others through gossip. However, the common denominator of these reasons is that gossip is used to provide evaluative information to one's interaction partners in order to influence their attitude and behavior towards gossip targets or themselves.

In an upward interaction, people are aware of their dependency on high power individuals for obtaining rewards and avoiding punishments (Keltner et al., 2003). Vis-à-vis the powerful, the powerless experience higher social and material threats, are more concerned with potential hazards and constraints on their behavior, and less optimistic about obtaining rewards (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Keltner et al., 2003). Upward relationships may signal that one is in a position of relative dependency and vulnerability and will need to use accessible means to change the situation in one's favor. Consequently, people may carefully seek opportunities to bypass formal communication channels and exert informal influence over higher-power individuals in order to gain more control over their social environment and their outcomes (Lammers, Stoker, Rink, & Galinsky, 2016), to ensure that they are treated fairly, that transgressors are punished (Stamkou et al., 2016), to receive adequate resources and attention, or to avoid other

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

disadvantages or threats associated with their relative level of power. In social exchange terms, gossip is likely to be perceived as a high benefit, low cost strategy for exerting informal upward influence, because merely the unidirectional communication of one's message can be expected to have at least a minimal effect on the receiver in the desired direction (Scherer & Cho, 2003).

Hypothesis 3a. Individuals will experience a higher motive to exert influence in upward relationships compared to downward or lateral relationships.

Hypothesis 3b. Exerting influence will mediate the effect of hierarchical power on gossip.

2.2.3. Social support

In order to cope with the challenges and threats they regularly experience, humans have a fundamental need to affiliate with others and to find emotional support (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People seek positive affective ties, in which they can express their emotions, receive support, and experience a sense of identity and belonging (Coleman, 1988). Gossip is a way to build and maintain social relationships, helping individuals find allies and a group to belong to (Dunbar, 2004). By discovering common perceptions and attitudes about others through gossip, people can develop interpersonal closeness, solidarity, and a shared social identity (e.g. Fine & Rosnow, 1978). People are especially motivated to engage in negative gossip, which helps develop trust over time, cement relationships, and create a safe environment where they can freely express their emotions, opinions, or concerns about social targets, and seek and receive care and comfort from interaction partners (Bosson et al., 2006; Foster, 2004; Peters & Kashima, 2007; Peters, Kashima, & Clark, 2009; Rimé, 2009; Waddington & Fletcher, 2005). Thus, gossip is an effective way of social bonding and of seeking social support.

However, powerful people, higher in the formal hierarchy, may purposely avoid the gossip network of lower power individuals, because downward gossip might bring disadvantages. Due to potential status leakage from higher to lower power people (Podolny, 2005), and because they feel more autonomous, more self-sufficient, and less lonely (Lammers et al., 2012, 2016), the powerful may have a lower motive to seek support and may strive to maintain or increase social distance from the powerless. Bonding with a lower power partner may damage one's reputation or the power relation, whereas bonding with equal or higher power partners may be more functional (Emerson, 1962). Therefore, in social exchange terms, seeking support from subordinates has high costs and low benefits, decreasing one's motivation to gossip downwards to seek support.

Furthermore, lateral relationships are governed by mutual dependence and reciprocity between people (Gouldner, 1960; Molm, 1991), whereas upward relationships are governed by one's asymmetrical dependence on the higher power person (Galinsky et al., 2008; Keltner et al., 2003). Because in lateral relationships the interaction partners are likely to share their thoughts and emotions and offer each other emotional support on a reciprocal basis (Grosser et al., 2010), the motivation to seek support from peers might be higher than with superiors (see also Berger, 2014).

Hypothesis 4a. People will have a higher motive to seek support in

lateral interactions compared to downward or upward interactions.

Hypotheses 4b. Seeking social support will mediate the effect of hierarchical power on gossip.

However, some reports suggest that people may also be interested in seeking support upwards because forming a close relationship with a higher power person may be instrumental in gaining influence and reducing one's dependency on this person (e.g. Case, Conlon, & Maner, 2015; Keltner et al., 2003). Seeking instrumental support is focused on building positive social rapport (or networking) with people who might help one achieve goals, whereas seeking expressive support (or companionship) is focused on building positive affective ties, in which people more freely express their emotions and receive comfort (Coleman, 1988; see also Rook, 1987, for a discussion about the two types of support). In Study 3 we therefore explore how different power relationships influence instrumental and expressive support seeking motives and gossip behavior.

2.3. Overview of studies

To test our hypotheses, we conducted three studies in which we manipulated the hierarchical power relationship of interaction partners. We first conducted a laboratory experiment with a student sample to investigate direct effects of hierarchical power on negative gossip behavior (Study 1). Subsequently, in a scenario (Study 2) and a critical incident study (Study 3) with working population samples we tested our mediation hypotheses, assessing the role of information, influence, and social support motives in spreading negative gossip. For an overview of our conceptual model, see Fig. 1.

3. Study 1

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Design and participants

One hundred and twenty-eight students (80 female) at a Dutch university with a mean age of 22.24 ($SD = 2.85$) participated in a laboratory study in exchange of course credit or 4 Euros. Participants joined two experimental confederates (A and B) to form teams of three. These three-person teams were randomly assigned to a power condition in a 2×2 factorial design varying the power of the potential gossiper (the participant) and the receiver of gossip (confederate A); the third group member (confederate B, and gossip target) had low power across conditions. In line with Hypothesis 1, we expected gossip to be less likely to occur and to be less elaborate in the downward power condition (high power gossiper and low power receiver) than in the other three conditions.

3.1.2. Cover story and hierarchical power manipulation

We informed participants that we investigated the effect of newcomers and task interruptions on task performance, by using groups of three members. Participants imagined they were the survivors of a spaceship that crashed on the Moon and had to rank 15 items into three categories according to their usefulness for survival - reaching the space station (Hall & Watson, 1971). Participants were instructed that based on their answers on a leadership questionnaire, all team members were

assigned the role of either officer or crew member in the group survival task, independently of other group members' responses, and that it was possible that all, some, or none of them were officers (or crew members, respectively). Participants read a detailed description of both officer and crew member roles: the officer had the power to rank 5 unique items without consulting the others, to chair the discussion, and to evaluate the team members' performance and divide a potential prize of 50 euro among the 3 group members at the end of the experiment. Participants and confederate A (the potential gossip receiver) were randomly assigned low or high power, and B (potential gossip target) always had low power. When both participant and confederate A had high power, the two officers would each have control over 5 items, evaluate the crew members and suggest a way of dividing the potential prize. Crew members had no specific responsibilities rather than following the commands or instructions of the officer, if one was present.

3.1.3. Procedure

When participants arrived in the laboratory, two female confederates posing as participants were already waiting to begin the study. Upon participants' arrival, the three group members were seated in separate cubicles, where they filled in questionnaires (including an alleged "leadership questionnaire"), received instructions about the group task, and read the hierarchical power manipulations. Participants first read that the computer had randomly assigned each group member the labels "A", "B" or "C" and were instructed to write this letter on a sticker and wear it until the end of the experiment in order to be visible to the other group members. All participants received the label "C". Next, participants read that the newcomer role was randomly assigned by the computer to another team member (who was always confederate A), and that this person would start solving the group task alone and join the other two participants after a few minutes. After this, participants read a description of the Moon survival task. Next, participants read descriptions of the officer (high power) and crew member (low power) roles for the survival task, and that based on their scores on the "leadership questionnaire", they and the other group members would be assigned the role of either officer (high power) or crew member (low power). Immediately after this, participants were informed about everyone's power role assignments.

Afterwards, the participant and confederate B (the potential gossip target) went to a meeting room where they started discussing the task, while confederate A, the newcomer (and potential gossip receiver), would start the task alone in a separate room. Confederates B was instructed to act uncooperatively by saying: "This task is really boring," "I don't know what to say, all the items seem the same to me," and to express disinterest in the task by leaning away from the table and pushing the materials towards the participant.

After three minutes the newcomer (confederate A) joined the team. At this moment the experimenter repeated the power manipulation by providing instructions and materials for the high power group members, which consisted of a list of the items they had full decision power over, an evaluation form for assessing the performance of all team members in the survival task, and for indicating how to allocate the potential prize money between the team members. The teams worked on the task for about 3 min, when the experimenter returned announcing the task interruption (which was presented in the beginning as part of the research). The experimenter explained that confederate B was randomly chosen to leave the room, while the remaining two members (the participant and confederate A) stayed in the meeting room but could not discuss the task until B returned. Thus, participants were provided with an opportunity to gossip about confederate B. Unless participants started talking spontaneously, confederate A was instructed to casually ask participants how they experienced the task in the first stage, when they worked only with confederate B. After approximately two minutes, confederate B returned, and the groups finished the task. At the end of the task, participants went back to their cubicles, where they filled in other measures and were debriefed.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Negative gossip occurrence and elaboration

The time interval when participants had the chance to share gossip with confederate A about confederate B was video recorded. Two independent pairs of raters (four raters in total) coded these videos. Within each pair, coders discussed the videos and decided on one code. They first coded *gossip occurrence*: whether participants did not gossip (coded with 0), whether they gossiped when triggered by confederate A (coded with 1), or whether they gossiped spontaneously (coded with 2), $Cohen's\ k_{\text{appa}} = 1$. Furthermore, the two coding pairs also rated the content of gossip with two measures reflecting how *evaluative* and how *descriptive* the talk about the target was. The evaluative content varied from not at all evaluative (0, e.g. "I proposed stuff and she just agreed"), to low (1, e.g. "she was not really enthusiastic"), medium (2, e.g. "she is weird"), and high (3, e.g. "she was as cold as ice"), $ICC = 0.92$; we averaged the ratings of the two pairs into a measure of *evaluative gossip content*, $M = 0.93$; $SD = 1.02$. The descriptive content of gossip, indicating how much detail was provided about the behavior of the target, was coded on a four point scale ranging from not at all descriptive (0, e.g. "she was withdrawn and closed"), to low (1, e.g. "she suggested one thing but not really"), medium (2, e.g. "it was like one way traffic, she didn't say anything"); and high (3, e.g. "this girl doesn't think it is interesting, she thought it was boring, she wasn't interested, it wasn't a really active discussion, she said I'm not sure, I don't know"), $ICC = 0.94$; we averaged the ratings of the two pairs of coders into a measure of *descriptive gossip content*, $M = 1.23$; $SD = 1.11$. We summed the descriptive and evaluative gossip ratings to calculate the degree of *gossip elaboration*, $\alpha = 0.78$, $M = 2.16$; $SD = 1.94$.

3.2.2. Manipulation checks

Participants indicated on dichotomous measures for all team members (A – gossip receiver, B – gossip target, and C – participant) whether they had high or low power (officer or crew member). Afterwards, we measured participants' perceived power of all members of their group, by using four Likert-type items (1- not at all; 7 very much): "How much was A/B/C in charge of directing the group task?", "How much is A/B/C in charge of evaluating the other participants?", "How much is A/B/C in charge of allocating the 50 euro bonus?", and "To what extent did/does A/B/C have power over the regular crew members?". Internal consistency of these scale was sufficient: α participant power = 0.85; α receiver power = 0.90; α target power = 0.89.

3.3. Results

3.3.1. Manipulation check

All participants correctly indicated whether they were assigned to the high power ($N = 64$) or low power condition ($N = 64$). All participants who interacted with a low power gossip receiver correctly indicated that confederate A was a crew member ($N = 63$), and 8 out of 65 participants assigned to interact with a high power receiver incorrectly indicated that confederate A had low power. Moreover, 5 participants incorrectly indicated that the gossip target (confederate B) had high power. A total of 8 participants wrongly indicated the power level of at least one confederate and were excluded from further analyses (including them did not change results). Two-way ANOVAs with gossip power and receiver power as predictors indicated that participants' perceived power was higher when they were assigned high power ($M = 6.19$; $SD = 0.56$) than low power ($M = 3.38$; $SD = 1.44$), $F(1, 116) = 196.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.62$; the power of receiver and the interaction effect were not significant ($F(1, 116) = 1.41$, $p = .23$, and $F(1, 116) = 0.55$, $p = .45$, respectively). Participants reported the power of the gossip receiver to be higher when gossip receivers were assigned high power ($M = 6.14$; $SD = 0.68$) as compared to low power ($M = 3.11$; $SD = 1.49$), $F(1, 116) = 195.98$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.62$; the effect of power of gossip and the interaction effect were not

significant ($F(1, 116) = 2.14, p = .14$, and $F(1, 116) = 0.99, p = .75$, respectively). Thus, the power manipulations were generally successful.

3.3.2. Gossip occurrence and elaboration

Thirty-five participants did not gossip at all, 67 gossiped when triggered by confederate A, and 18 gossiped spontaneously. A binary logistic regression, where no gossip was coded with 0 and gossip behavior was coded with 1, showed that gossiper power influenced the occurrence of gossip, $b = -0.49, p = .02$, indicating that 80.3% of participants in the low power condition gossiped, compared to 61% in the high power condition. Gossip occurrence was not predicted by receiver power, $b = 0.32, p = .13$, or by the interaction between gossiper and receiver power, $b = -0.04, p = .83$. Next, we tested [Hypothesis 1](#), predicting that gossip is less likely in downward than lateral or upward interactions. A planned contrast showed that gossip was less likely in the downward power condition (high power gossiper interacting with low power receiver) than in the other conditions, $b = -1.03, p = .02$. Although this result is consistent with [Hypothesis 1](#), it should be noted that the difference in gossip between the two conditions with high gossiper power was not statistically significant (downward gossip: 54.8%; lateral gossip: 67.9%), $b = -0.55, p = .30$, whereas we had expected that downward gossip would be less prevalent than lateral gossip among high power individuals.

We conducted a two-way ANOVA on gossip elaboration, with gossiper power and receiver power as predictors. Gossip was more elaborate when participants had low power ($M = 2.58, SD = 1.92$) than high power ($M = 1.78, SD = 1.91$), $F(1, 116) = 4.85, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = 0.04$. There was no effect of receiver power nor an interaction effect of gossiper and receiver power, $F(1, 116) = 0.06, p = .79$, and $F(1, 116) = 0.78, p = .37$, respectively, which offers partial support for [Hypothesis 1](#). To further test our prediction that gossip is less elaborate in downward interactions than in lateral or upward interactions, we conducted a planned contrast in which the condition of downward power (high power gossiper and low power receiver) was coded with 3 and each of the other conditions were coded with -1 . In line with [Hypothesis 1](#), downward gossip was marginally less elaborate than gossip in the other conditions, $t(116) = -1.95, p = .053$. However, we should note again that, within the high power gossiper condition, the difference between the downward gossip condition ($M = 1.59, SD = 1.85$) and the lateral gossip condition ($M = 2.00, SD = 2.00$) was not significant, $t(116) = -0.80, p = .42$.

3.4. Discussion

Findings were in line with our prediction that gossip occurred less in a downward power relationship than in a lateral relation among low power actors or in an upward power relation to an interaction partner. In addition, if people in a downward power condition gossiped, they did so without providing much detail or being very evaluative (low elaboration). However, downward gossip was not less likely or elaborate than lateral gossip between a high power gossiper and a high power receiver.

In this study, there were no effects of receiver power on gossip behavior. This may be due to our experimental set-up. To create realistic conditions for participants to gossip, our study required the use of two confederates: a gossip target and a gossip receiver. These confederates had strict instructions for their interaction with participants. Therefore, confederate A behaved in the same way towards the participants regardless of the hierarchical power level she was assigned. In particular, she did not show specific behaviors associated with high power, such as directing the discussion and exerting control over the resources she was assigned. Although manipulation checks showed that participants correctly remembered the hierarchical power role assigned to confederate A (gossip receiver), this mere role information was probably not sufficient to create a felt realism in participants that they were interacting with a powerful superior, and therefore was unlikely

to shape gossip behavior. Consequently, participants may have been focused solely on their own power level, ignoring the high (versus low) power level of the receiver¹. Next, we conducted a study in which we could compare the effect of upward, lateral, and downward power on gossip more reliably, and could measure people's motives for gossip. Thus, in Study 2 we tested all hypotheses.

4. Study 2

4.1. Participants

Two hundred US employees (97 female, 3 did not indicate their gender) who worked at least 20 h a week completed an online questionnaire via Amazon Mechanical Turk (M-turk) in exchange for 1.5 \$. Mean age was 38.68 years ($SD = 9.13$); 167 participants had a university degree and 33 had a high school degree.

4.2. Procedure

Participants read that the study was about workplace communication and were asked to recall a recent negative event that happened at work, involving at least one other person who works in the same organization (Person X), and write a short paragraph describing the incident.

4.3. Manipulation

After they described the negative incident, participants were randomly assigned to a hierarchical power condition, by being asked to imagine that while taking a short break at work at the coffee corner they met another person (person Y) who was either a superior (upward power relation, $N = 67$), a peer (equal power relation, $N = 67$), or a subordinate (downward power relation, $N = 66$) who started making small talk by asking how their day was going.

4.4. Measures

Gossip intention was measured by asking participants "to what extent are you inclined to tell your superior/colleague/subordinate about the negative event related to Person X?". The response scale had a 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) format.

Afterwards, participants filled in two open questions asking details about what participants would tell their conversation partner regarding the event involving Person X, and what motive they would have for sharing this information with person Y. The answers were coded by two raters who were blind to power condition; one coder was also blind to hypotheses. The coders rated whether the following motives were either present (coded with 1) or absent (coded with 0): *to seek information* (e.g. "it is good to get other opinions", "to ask for her experience in similar situations"); *to exert influence* (e.g. "I would want Y to know what kind of person just joined the team", "I want to defend my reputation"); *to seek support* (e.g. "I feel a close relationship to this colleague and I can confide in them", "I would hope he would laugh with me over the circumstances", "Because I want to vent to someone who understands"). Some participants indicated that they would not gossip because *gossip would be inappropriate* (e.g. "would be no reason to share

¹ To address limitations associated with using confederates as interaction partners, we conducted another experiment in which face-to-face interactions were replaced with computer mediated scripted interactions. However, from 214 participants, 109 suspected and 54 were sure that the interaction partner's responses were simulated, and that they did not interact with real people (the interaction with both alleged team members felt unnatural). Because the gossip paradigm was not believable for 76% of participants, we did not use this study. We reported this study in the online supplementary materials.

Table 1
Descriptives and correlations between measured variables in Study 2.

	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Gender	−0.02	1.00	1						
2. Age	38.68	9.13	0.04	1					
3. Gossip intention	4.46	2.23	−0.18**	0.00	1				
4. Information seeking	0.10	0.30	−0.10	0.03	0.19**	1			
5. Influence	0.53	0.49	0.00	−0.04	0.46**	−0.17	1		
6. Social support	0.12	0.32	−0.00	0.03	0.23**	0.09	−0.23**	1	
7. Inappropriateness	0.25	0.43	0.13	−0.00	−0.75**	−0.13	−0.57**	−0.22**	1

$N = 200$; gender was coded with -1 for men and 1 for women.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

it”, “there is nothing to be gained other than making me look bad”). The coders’ agreement rates were between 0.93 and 0.97 (Cohen’s Kappa); the two ratings were averaged into one measure for each motive.

At the end of the study we checked the hierarchical power manipulation by asking participants to indicate their relative power to the interaction partner on two bipolar items: “who has more power” and “who has more influence”; the response scale was from 1 (me) to 7 (the receiver). These items were averaged into one measure, $\alpha = 0.94$.

4.5. Results

4.5.1. Manipulation check

The relative power of gossip and receiver differed by condition in the way we anticipated, $F(2, 197) = 111.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.53$. In the upward power condition, where the participants imagined an interaction with a superior, this person had higher relative power to the participant ($M = 6.17$) than in the other two conditions, $p < .001$. Furthermore, in the lateral power condition, the interaction partner had higher relative power ($M = 3.91$) than in the downward power condition ($M = 2.28$), $p < .001$. Descriptive statistics and correlations are shown in Table 1.

4.5.2. Hypotheses testing

In line with Hypothesis 1, the power relationship between participants and interaction partners influenced gossip intention, $F(2, 197) = 9.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.09$, and the extent to which gossip was seen as inappropriate, $F(2, 197) = 5.33$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$. Planned contrasts showed that people were less likely to gossip downwards compared to upwards, $t(197) = -2.99$, $p = .003$, and laterally, $t(197) = -4.36$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, downward gossip was seen as more inappropriate than upward gossip, $t(197) = 2.10$, $p = .04$, and lateral gossip, $t(197) = 3.21$, $p = .002$. No other means differed significantly for gossip occurrence or perceptions of inappropriateness (see Table 2).

One-way ANOVAs further showed that participants’ motives differed as a function of power condition for information seeking, $F(2, 197) = 4.17$, $p = .02$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$, exerting influence, $F(2, 197) = 5.47$,

Table 2
Means, standard deviations, and ANOVA results for variables in Study 2.

	M upward power (SD)	M lateral power (SD)	M downward power (SD)	F value
Gossip intention	4.66 (2.25)	5.16 (1.92)	3.55 (2.22) ^a	9.95***
Inappropriateness	0.23 (0.42)	0.14 (0.35)	0.38 (0.48) ^a	5.33**
Information seeking	0.07 (0.26)	0.19 (0.39) ^a	0.05 (0.21)	4.17*
Influence	0.68 (0.46) ^a	0.49 (0.50)	0.41 (0.48)	5.47**
Social support	0.04 (0.20)	0.23 (0.42) ^a	0.08 (0.27)	7.19***

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

^a Means are significantly different from means in the other two conditions.

$p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$, and social support, $F(2, 197) = 7.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$. In line with Hypothesis 2a, planned contrasts showed that people were more motivated to seek information from peers compared to superiors, $t(197) = 2.27$, $p = .02$, and subordinates, $t(197) = 2.67$, $p = .008$. As predicted by Hypothesis 3a, people sought more support from peers compared to superiors, $t(197) = 3.58$, $p < .001$, and subordinates, $t(197) = 2.86$, $p = .005$. Lastly, supporting Hypothesis 4a, desire to influence was higher in interactions with superiors compared to peers $t(197) = -2.31$, $p = .02$, and subordinates, $t(197) = 3.20$, $p = .002$. No other means differed significantly for the gossip motives.

We used the bootstrapping procedure outlined by Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007), to assess the indirect effects of power relationship on gossip through information seeking, social influence and social bonding motives. Regression results and indirect effects are shown in Table 3. When entered simultaneously, information seeking, exerting influence, and support predicted gossip intentions, $b = 1.67$, $p < .001$, $b = 2.53$, $p < .001$, and $b = 2.22$, $p < .001$, respectively. Furthermore, as expected, the three gossip motives mediated the effect of power relationship on gossip: compared to lateral interactions, people were less likely to gossip in order to seek information in upward, indirect effect = -0.20 , CI $[-0.42; -0.01]$, and in downwards interactions, indirect effect = -0.23 , CI $[-0.44; -0.05]$, supporting Hypothesis 2b. Similarly, in upward interactions and in downward interactions people were less likely to gossip in order to seek support compared to lateral interactions, indirect effect = -0.43 , CI $[-0.78; -0.15]$, and indirect effect = -0.34 , CI $[-0.68; -0.06]$, respectively; these results support Hypothesis 3b. Furthermore, in line with Hypothesis 4b, in upward interactions people were more interested in gaining influence through gossip, as compared to lateral interactions, indirect effect = 0.49 , CI $[0.07; 0.92]$.

4.6. Discussion

In line with our expectations, downward gossip was less likely to occur than lateral or upward gossip. Furthermore, different motives were associated with the type of power relation: people gossiped with their peers to seek information and support, gossiped with their superiors in order to exert informal influence, and avoided gossiping to subordinates, because such gossip was perceived as inappropriate. Importantly, results supported our prediction that people sought more (expressive) support from their peers than from superiors through gossip, which is in line with other work showing that people look for support and comfort in their strong ties (e.g. Berger, 2014; Peters et al., 2009). In the next study we aimed to replicate these findings with a bigger sample and using measures of participants’ real-life behavior instead of a hypothetical response. Thus, in Study 3 we used different measures for gossip behavior and motives to test all our hypotheses.

Table 3
Summary of mediation results for Study 2.

	1. Mediator variable models			2. Dependent variable model
	Info. seeking	Influence	Social support	Gossip intention ^b
Constant	0.19 (0.03) ^{***}	0.49 (0.06) ^{***}	0.23 (0.04) ^{***}	3.05 (0.29) ^{***}
D1: Lateral ^a vs up	−0.12 (0.05) [*]	0.19 (0.08) [*]	−0.19 (0.05) ^{***}	−0.36 (0.31)
D2: Lateral ^a vs down	−0.14 (0.05) ^{**}	−0.08 (0.08)	−0.15 (0.05) ^{**}	−0.84 (0.31) ^{**}
Information seeking				1.67 (0.40) ^{***}
Influence				2.53 (0.26) ^{***}
Social support				2.22 (0.39) ^{***}
<i>Indirect effects on gossip intention</i>				
Lateral vs up	−0.20 [−0.42; −0.01]	0.49 [0.07; 0.92]	−0.43 [−0.78; −0.15]	
Lateral vs down	−0.23 [−0.44; −0.05]	−0.19 [−0.63; 0.24]	−0.34 [−0.68; −0.06]	

N = 200; standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

^a Because the power relation is a multicategorical variable, two dummy variables were used in the analysis (D1 and D2), with lateral power as a reference category. For D1, lateral power was coded with 0, upward with 1, and downward with 0; for D2, lateral and upward power were coded with 0, and downward with 1. The two dummies were entered simultaneously.

^b The listed mediators were entered simultaneously.

5. Study 3

5.1. Participants

Seven hundred eighty-two US employees (349 female, 27 did not indicate their gender) who worked at least 20 h a week voluntarily and anonymously completed an online questionnaire via M-Turk in exchange for 1 USD. Participants were eligible only if they had at least one subordinate and one superior at their primary workplace. Mean age was 35.78 years ($SD = 9.81$).

5.2. Manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to a power condition, by being asked to think of their superior (upward power relation, $N = 259$), peer (lateral power relation, $N = 258$), or subordinate (downward power relation, $N = 265$) with whom they interact the most and write down the (nick)name of this person.

5.3. Procedure

Afterwards, as in Study 2, participants were asked to recall a recent negative event that happened at work, involving at least one other person who works in the same organization (Person X), but who is not the person mentioned earlier as their most salient superior/peer/subordinate, and write a short paragraph describing the incident. Participants were asked to recall their following interaction with the salient superior/peer/subordinate (depending on condition) after the negative incident and report whether they engaged in gossip about this event.

5.4. Measures

Participants first reported on a dichotomous measure if they talked about the negative event involving the target (*gossip occurrence*). If participants indicated that they gossiped, they answered a series of items about the gossip interaction and their motives, measured on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). *Gossip elaboration* was measured with 4 items: “How detailed was your description of the negative event involving person X?”, “How much did you analyze the negative event during this conversation with your superior/peer/subordinate?”, “How emotionally involved were you during this conversation with your superior/ peer/ subordinate?”, and “How intense was this

conversation with your superior/ peer/ subordinate?”, $\alpha = 0.80$.

Next, we measured a series of motives for gossiping, following the statement “For me, a reason to engage in this conversation was ...”. *Information seeking* was measured with 3 items adapted from Beersma and Van Kleef (2012): “to check whether my superior/peer/subordinate thought the same about person X”, “to compare my ideas about person X with my superior/peer/subordinate”, and “to check whether my image of person X was correct”, $\alpha = 0.91$. Based on our conceptualization of the influence motive as passing on gossip information in order to influence receiver’s impressions, attitudes, and behaviors towards the gossip target, we developed (and pretested) 3 items to measure *exerting influence*: “to inform my superior/peer/subordinate about what happened”, “my superior/peer/subordinate should know about what happened”, and “to tell my superior/peer/subordinate about the event involving person X”, $\alpha = 0.89^2$. For seeking social support, we used two measures, which tap into different aspects of social connectedness. We measured the extent to which people were motivated by *instrumental social support* (focused on building social rapport and advantageous relationships, or networking) with 3 items from LaRose & Eastin, 2004: “to look for support from my superior/peer/subordinate”, “to feel like I belong with my superior/peer/subordinate”, and “to maintain a relationship I value with my superior/peer/subordinate”, $\alpha = 0.80$. Furthermore, because emotion sharing is important in social support (Peters et al., 2009; Rimé, 2009), we measured emotion expression as an indicator of *expressive social support*: “to release stress”, “to vent my emotions”, “to let off steam”, $\alpha = 0.93$. Because some of the scales were developed for this study, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to ensure the validity of these measures, using AMOS software. The hypothesized four factor model (information seeking, exerting influence, seeking expressive support, and seeking instrumental support) had a good fit, $\chi^2(48) = 235.91$, $p < .001$, $NFI = 0.95$, $CFI = 0.96$, $TLI = 0.93$, $RMSEA = 0.07$.

If participants indicated that they did not gossip, we measured the extent to which the gossip was considered *inappropriate* with four items, developed from the open answers in Study 2: “Discussing the negative event was not important”, “The negative event was not interesting for

² We also measured more explicitly the desire to persuade the receiver, with 3 items: “to let my superior/peer/subordinate know how I interpreted the event”, “to tell my superior/peer/subordinate what I think of person X”, and “to influence my superior’s/peer’s/subordinate’s opinion about person X”, $\alpha = 0.70$. All effects for this variable are similar to the ones obtained for the influence measure reported here.

my superior/peer/subordinate”, “The negative event was not worth mentioning”, and “This event did not concern my superior/peer/subordinate”, $\alpha = 0.77$.

Next, all participants indicated on a dichotomous item whether they used a formal system to report the negative incident to their superior, peer, or subordinate, and to describe the system in an open question. Afterwards, participants were asked to indicate on three dichotomous measures whether they talked with (other) superiors, peers, and subordinates about the negative incident. Before the end of the survey, as in Study 2, participants filled in a measure of power relative to the interaction partner, $\alpha = 0.96$.

5.5. Results

5.5.1. Manipulation check

The relative power of participant and interaction partner differed by condition in the way we anticipated, $F(2, 763) = 663.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.63$. In the upward power condition, where the participants recalled an interaction with a superior, this person had higher relative power to the participant ($M = 6.12$) than in the other two conditions, $t(763) = 32.90$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, in the lateral power condition, the interaction partner had higher relative power ($M = 3.51$) than in the downward power condition ($M = 1.61$), $t(763) = 15.29$, $p < .001$. Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 4.

5.5.2. Gossip behavior

The type of power relation shaped whether participants gossiped or not, $\chi^2(2) = 9.36$, $p = .009$. People in the downward power condition gossiped less (61.5%) than people in the lateral power condition (74%), $b = -0.57$, $p = .002$. No other contrasts were significant. It is interesting to note that the majority of participants in all conditions did gossip to their interaction partner, which is consistent with views of gossip as a functional and integral part of organizational communication. Gossip elaboration also differed between conditions, $F(2, 519) = 7.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$. In line with Hypothesis 1, gossip was less elaborate in the downward ($M = 4.61$) than upward ($M = 5.02$, $p = .002$) and lateral power conditions ($M = 5.06$, $p = .001$).

Participants in all conditions also indicated whether they gossiped to (other) superiors, peers and subordinates. Gossip to peers (32.1%) occurred more than gossip to superiors (25.7%), which occurred more than gossip to subordinates (15%). The likelihoods of gossip to the three types of interaction partners were all significantly different from each other, all $\chi^2(1) > 39.10$, all $p < .001$, in line with Hypothesis 1.

5.5.3. Motives to gossip

Information seeking differed per condition, $F(2, 518) = 21.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.08$; people were more motivated to seek information from peers compared to superiors, $t(518) = 4.99$, $p < .001$, and

Table 5

Means, standard deviations and ANOVA results for variables in Study 3.

Variable	M upward power (SD)	M equal power (SD)	M downward power (SD)	F value
Gossip elaboration	5.02 (1.06)	5.06 (1.30)	4.61 (1.21) ^a	7.18***
Information seeking	3.95 (1.86)	4.93 (1.80) ^a	3.73 (1.91)	21.21***
Influence	5.63 (1.65)	5.47 (1.48)	5.08 (1.62) ^a	5.34**
Instrumental support	4.15 (1.64)	4.42 (1.73)	3.61 (1.71) ^a	10.12***
Expressive support	3.83 (1.98)	4.98 (1.79) ^a	3.63 (1.97)	25.73***
Inappropriateness	3.81 (1.64) ^a	4.59 (1.57)	4.62 (1.47)	7.10***

^a $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

^a Means are significantly different from means in the other two conditions.

subordinates, $t(518) = 6.04$, $p < .001$. Information seeking did not differ between the upward and downward power conditions (means are reported in Table 5). Similarly, and as in Study 2, expressive support differed as a function of power condition, $F(2, 518) = 25.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.09$, so that people sought more support from peers than from superiors, $t(518) = 5.66$, $p < .001$, and subordinates $t(518) = 6.55$, $p < .001$. Expressive support did not differ between the upward and downward power conditions. Thus, in line with Hypotheses 2a and 4a, information seeking and expressive support motives were higher in lateral than in hierarchical interactions.

Participants' desire to influence the receiver differed as a function of power condition, $F(2, 518) = 5.34$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$, so that people were less interested in exerting downwards informal influence than laterally, $t(518) = -2.29$, $p = .02$, and upwards $t(518) = -3.18$, $p = .002$. Desire to influence did not differ between the upward and lateral power conditions. Furthermore, a similar pattern was observed for instrumental social support. Instrumental support motivation differed as a function of power condition, $F(2, 518) = 10.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$, so that people were less interested in instrumental support from subordinates than from peers, $t(518) = -4.44$, $p < .001$, and from superiors, $t(518) = -2.93$, $p = .004$. Instrumental support did not differ between the upward and lateral power conditions. These results suggest that exerting influence and instrumental support (which reflects one's desire to have beneficial relationships) were valuable in upward as well as in lateral interactions compared to downward interactions. These results offer partial support to Hypothesis 3a, which predicted that influence would be higher in upward compared to lateral and downward interactions.

As in Study 2, we conducted multiple mediation analyses; regression results and indirect effects are reported in Table 6. Information seeking, expressive support, and exerting influence predicted gossip elaboration, $b = 0.13$, $p < .001$, $b = .09$, $p < .001$, and $b = 0.24$, $p < .001$, respectively. Due to the strong correlation between expressive support and instrumental support ($r = 0.59$, $p < .001$, see Table 4),

Table 4

Correlations between measured variables in Study 3.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Gender	1								
2 Age	0.10**	1							
3 Gossip occurrence	-0.03	0.06	1						
4 Gossip elaboration	0.06	0.13**	-	1					
5 Information seeking	-0.04	-0.01	-	0.34**	1				
6 Influence	-0.02	-0.01	-	0.38**	0.10*	1			
7 Instrumental support	-0.05	-0.03	-	0.34**	0.46**	0.20**	1		
8 Expressive support	-0.03	-0.00	-	0.31**	0.40**	0.08*	0.59**	1	
9 Formal communication	0.05	-0.03	0.007	0.11*	-0.06	0.13**	-0.06	-0.11*	1

Gender was coded with -1 for men and 1 for women; gossip occurrence and formal communication were coded with 0 (no action) and 1 (action); * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. Because gossip motives were only measured when gossip occurred, no correlations between gossip occurrence and motives could be computed.

Table 6
Summary of mediation results for Study 3.

	1. Mediator variable models				2. Dependent variable model
	Information seeking	Expressive support	Influence	Instrumental support	Gossip elaboration ^b
Constant	4.93 (0.14)***	4.98 (0.14)***	5.47 (0.12)***	4.42 (0.12)***	2.30 (0.21)***
D1: Lateral ^a vs up	−0.98 (0.19)***	−1.14 (0.20)***	0.16 (0.16)	−0.26 (0.17)	0.17 (0.11)
D2: Lateral ^a vs down	−1.20 (0.20)***	−1.34 (0.20)***	−0.39 (0.17)*	−0.81 (0.18)***	−0.01 (0.11)
Information seeking					0.13 (0.03)***
Expressive support					0.09 (0.03)***
Influence					0.24 (0.03)***
Instrumental support					0.05 (0.03)
<i>Indirect effects on gossip elaboration</i>					
Lateral vs up	−0.13 [−0.21; −0.06]	−0.11 [−0.20; −0.04]	0.04 [−0.04; 0.12]	−0.01 [−0.05; 0.008]	
Lateral vs down	−0.16 [−0.26; −0.08]	−0.13 [−0.23; −0.05]	−0.09 [−0.19; −0.01]	−0.04 [−0.12; 0.02]	

N = 521; standard errors in parentheses.

*** $p < .01$.

* $p < .05$.

*** $p < .001$.

^a Because the power relation is a multicategorical variable, two dummy variables were used in the analysis (D1 and D2), with the lateral power condition as a reference category. For D1, lateral power was coded with 0, upward with 1, and downward with 0; for D2, lateral and upward power were coded with 0, and downward with 1. The two dummies were entered simultaneously.

^b The listed mediators were entered simultaneously.

instrumental support seeking was unrelated to gossip elaboration, $b = 0.05$, $p = .10$. However, when entered alone, instrumental support was also positively related to gossip elaboration, $b = 0.22$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, as predicted by Hypotheses 2b, 3b, and 4b, the gossip motives mediated the effect of power relationship on gossip elaboration: compared to lateral interactions, people gossiped less elaborately in order to seek information in upward, *indirect effect* = $-0.13 [-0.21; -0.06]$, and in downwards interactions, *indirect effect* = $-0.16 [-0.26; -0.08]$ (Hypothesis 2b). Similarly, compared to lateral interactions people gossiped less elaborately in order to seek expressive support in upward, *indirect effect* = $-0.11 [-0.20; -0.04]$, and in downward interactions *indirect effect* = $-0.13 [-0.23; -0.05]$ (Hypothesis 3b). In downward compared to lateral interactions people were less interested in gaining influence through gossip, *indirect effect* = $-0.09 [-0.19; -0.01]$. Furthermore, when the motive to seek instrumental support was entered alone, results showed that people gossiped less elaborately to seek instrumental support in downward compared to lateral interactions, *indirect effect* = -0.18 , CI $[-0.29; -0.09]$ (Hypothesis 4b).

5.5.4. Motives not to gossip

The extent to which gossip was considered inappropriate differed by condition, $F(2, 248) = 7.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$; people interacting with superiors were less likely to perceive gossiping as inappropriate than those interacting with peers, $t(248) = -2.01$, $p = .04$, and subordinates, $t(248) = -3.92$, $p < .001$. Perceptions of inappropriateness did not differ between lateral and downward power conditions.

5.5.5. Formal communication

Likelihood of reporting the incident in a formal manner differed per condition, $\chi^2(2) = 7.10$, $p = .03$; people were more inclined to communicate formally with their subordinates (13.8%) than with peers (7.1%) or superiors (8.6%). Some examples of formal communication mentioned by participants in an open item are incident reports, emails, or notifying the human resources services.

5.6. Discussion

Participants' gossip behavior and motives were shaped by the power relation with their interaction partner. Results indicated that participants gossiped downwards less than laterally; furthermore, downward

gossip was less elaborate than upward and lateral gossip. Participants gossiped more with peers than with superiors or subordinates in order to seek information and expressive support; they gossiped more with superiors and peers than with subordinates in order to influence, and to seek instrumental support. Participants were less likely to perceive upward gossip as inappropriate compared to lateral or downward gossip, whereas participants interacting with subordinates were more likely than others to communicate using formal channels. These findings are in line with our theoretical model of gossip and show that power differences shape gossip behavior through specific motives.

6. General discussion

Previous research has recognized the functionality of gossip for individuals. Building on social exchange theory, we proposed that the specific hierarchical power relation between gossiper and gossip recipient will shape gossip motives and behaviors. Although some research on gossip offers anecdotal evidence that power relationships between individuals influence their gossip behavior (Bergmann, 1993; Scott, 1985; Wert & Salovey, 2004), this issue had not been systematically addressed.

Our research yielded two clear findings. First, across three studies, we found that people shared less gossip downwards than laterally or upwards. Furthermore, people perceived that gossiping downwards would be inappropriate and potentially harmful to them and were more likely to use formal channels in downward interactions compared to lateral or upward interactions. Second, depending on their power relation with their interaction partner, participants perceived gossip as a functional exchange of resources, but for different social resources. As hypothesized, people gossiped to exchange information and to seek social support from their peers more than from superiors or subordinates. This is consistent with the idea based in social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Gouldner, 1960) that people have relationships based on reciprocal exchanges of resources and mutual dependence with peers (Molm, 1991). People can count on peers to share insights about their social environment (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994), and to receive emotional support (Ellwardt, Steglich et al., 2012). Furthermore, participants gossiped upwards (Study 2) or laterally and upwards (Study 3) more than downwards in order to influence their conversation partner and to seek instrumental social support.

Because individuals are asymmetrically dependent on their superiors for accessing resources (e.g. Galinsky et al., 2008), upward gossip is a strategic way to informally influence superiors' opinions and worldview in line with their interests and needs. Similarly, developing instrumental support relationships (laterally and) upwards is desirable, because these alliances may grant people informal influence and control over resources (Case et al., 2015). These results suggest that gossip is functional in providing access to important resources like information, informal influence, and social support. However, as the current research shows, this functionality depends on the power relations between gossipers and recipient.

6.1. Theoretical implications

Our findings have implications for various streams of research. First, our findings regarding the asymmetrical nature of gossip behavior supports Magee and Galinsky's (2008) view of hierarchy as a self-reinforcing form of social organization. Because people tend to avoid lower power gossip partners, and seek higher power gossip partners, there is an asymmetry in gossip spreading patterns. People may opportunistically collect gossip from their subordinates, potentially without offering any gossip information in return; instead, they tend to gossip towards their own superiors. Therefore, the asymmetrical nature of gossip may strengthen the social isolation of those at the bottom of hierarchies, who become relatively disconnected from the grapevine, and help those at the top stay connected to their environment, by accessing gossip from multiple sources and forming accurate images of social targets (Sommerfeld et al., 2008). Furthermore, when power is salient, powerful people are able to process information efficiently and extract its meaning (Trope & Liberman, 2003), to respond less to other's emotion displays (Van Kleef, De Dreu, Pietroni, & Manstead, 2006), and to resist influence attempts. As such, high power people may be able to benefit from the information they receive through gossip from lower power interaction partners and use it to reinforce their hierarchical position.

Second, we use social exchange theory to conceptualize gossip as exchange of social resources. Our work integrates insights from the gossip literature, which has focused on the role of gossip in providing individuals with access to information, influence, and social support, with principles of social exchange theory and social power theory. The three studies together suggest that gossip behavior is driven by a cost-benefit analysis for accessing desired resources, and that relative costs and benefits depend on the power relationship with one's interaction partner. They also suggest that resource exchange rules and patterns differ depending on the type of hierarchical relation: information and social support are exchanged mainly in lateral power relations, whereas people use gossip to influence others in upward power relations. In this way, our work responds to Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) call for research focused on examining how different social exchange relationships may differentially relate to the exchange of distinct types of social resources.

Third, our studies suggest that in general, people avoid gossiping downwards, because this type of interaction is not functional. However, our functional perspective on gossip as exchange of social resources may be extended by investigating specific contexts in which downward gossip may be functional and occur more frequently. For example, when their power position is illegitimate or unstable (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008; Sligte, de Dreu, & Nijstad, 2011), or when they need timely input about critical affairs, people may strategically gossip downwards. Managers may gossip to key lower power employees in order to find information that can help them make timely decisions, influence others through informal channels, or find new friends who might support them if needed. Furthermore, research on gossip describes the motive to protect one's group members from being exploited by misbehaving social targets (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012). Some supplementary analyses on Study 3 data indeed showed that

people gossiped with subordinates and peers more than with superiors in order to protect them from harm³. Thus, in certain situations, downward gossip is functional, possibly because protecting one's subordinates also helps the gossipers avoid negative outcomes in the future. Moreover, certain types of downward relationships are likely to foster gossip. For example, in mentoring relationships, in which individuals with higher expertise offer guidance and support to those with less experience (Fagenson-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997), people might use downward gossip to share their insights with protégés, who may benefit from this information (see also Martinescu et al., 2014).

Fourth, our results are in line with earlier reports documenting the prevalence of gossip in daily life (e.g. Dunbar et al., 1997; Emler, 1994). In our Studies 1 and 3, where we measured gossip behavior, about 65% of participants engaged in gossip. These findings support the idea that gossip is indeed an essential part of social life and suggest that gossip may be important in satisfying psychological needs, which are the fundamental determinants of human behaviors (Latham & Pinder, 2005). It seems plausible that gossip provides access to resources that satisfy individuals' psychological needs, manifested through particular gossip motives. Thus, in order to better account for the omnipresence of gossip as a form of social exchange that provides information, influence, and social support, new theory could investigate how exchanging gossip is related to fundamental psychological needs.

6.2. Practical implications

Gossip is a widely disapproved behavior in the workplace, because it is perceived as harmful to others, disrespectful, and invasive (Bergmann, 1993), or as inefficient use of time and a waste of organizational resources (Clegg & van Ierssen, 2009). However, our work showed that gossip is widespread because it is functional in helping individuals seek information, exert influence, and seek support. Because gossip offers an informal way of achieving desirable outcomes, gossip may be a mechanism that stabilizes rather than challenges the power hierarchy in organizations and may help people avoid or attenuate conflicts in the workplace (Schoeman, 1994). For example, by relying on their network for support and comfort, people might avoid direct confrontations with targets, and safely de-escalate conflicts through gossip. The general disapproval of gossip is therefore unfortunate. Indeed, gossip is intrinsic to social and organizational life, and removing gossip would be impossible without banning all forms of communication (Noon & Delbridge, 1993).

Although most gossip is spread with benign intentions, such as learning about one's social environment, gaining control over one's outcomes or bonding with others, some gossip may be explicitly harmful. Because power is desirable (Keltner et al., 2003), and people strive to maintain or increase their power (Lammers et al., 2016; Nicholson, 2001), some may indeed use gossip to compete for resources, sabotage rivals, or usurp their power (Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Reynolds, Baumeister, & Maner, 2018). Furthermore, some power holders may feel threatened by gossip about them and become defensive (Mead & Maner, 2012), because gossip helps gossipers share their opinions and potentially create coalitions to take action against them

³ Because protecting one's group members from misbehaving targets is a salient motive in the gossip literature (e.g. Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Feinberg et al., 2012), we also measured this motive with 3 items adapted from Beersma and Van Kleef (2012): "to protect my superior/ peer/ subordinate against person X", "to warn my superior/ peer/ subordinate for the behavior of person X", and "to prevent my superior/ peer/ subordinate from being exploited by person X", $\alpha = 0.88$. Desire to protect the receiver was influenced by the power condition, $F(2, 518) = 4.62, p = .01$, so that gossiping with superiors was motivated less by protecting the receiver than was gossiping with peers, $t(518) = -2.89, p = .004$, and subordinates, $t(518) = -2.26, p = .02$. Motivation to protect the receiver did not differ between the lateral and downward power conditions.

(Peters & Kashima, 2007). Explicitly malicious gossip is relatively rare (Baumeister et al., 2004; Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Dunbar et al., 1997), but such instances are very salient (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), making all gossip seem intrusive, dangerous, and unacceptable. Thus, instead of aiming to suppress all gossip, we advise managers to identify when and why employees gossip, and to respond accordingly by providing information, more control over processes and outcomes, or by reducing competitive incentives, which may motivate people to engage in malicious gossip (see also Wittek & Wielers, 1998).

However, regardless of gossipers' benign or malign intentions, people who overhear negative gossip about themselves may experience gossip as harmful; in response, targets may retaliate against gossipers, become less cooperative, or leave the group (Martinescu, Janssen, & Nijstad, 2019). Integrating our current findings, new research and training programs could test ways of promoting constructive relationships of gossipers with targets. Raising awareness among employees about why gossip is ubiquitous, and how it may affect targets, but also cultivating proactive behaviors from gossipers themselves to limit harm to targets' well-being (e.g. explaining their motives, providing support) may be worthwhile strategies.

6.3. Limitations and future research

Our research has some noteworthy limitations. The three studies we reported showed that people shared less gossip in downward than in lateral or upward interactions. However, our hypothesis that downward gossip is less likely and elaborate than upwards and lateral gossip could only be tested in the field studies, but not in the lab experiment (see also Footnote 1 reporting another attempt to elicit gossip in a lab experiment). Study 1, where we used confederates as interaction partners, was partially successful in generating different gossip as a function of gossip power, when participants interacted with a low power partner. Because in the high power receiver condition the confederate did not enact the high power role (although participants were generally aware that that person was assigned high power), it is likely that low power participants did not genuinely perceive this as an upward or high power lateral interaction, which poses difficulties for interpreting the results. As such, we attempted to run this experiment again, without the use of confederates (reported in Footnote 1 and in the [supplementary materials](#)). In this study we replaced confederates with simulated interactions, to have higher control over the experimental situation. However, most participants recognized that the interactions with the target and receiver were scripted in the online chat program, making them perceive the experimental setting as highly unnatural. Participants found the uncooperative attitude of the target as unrealistically negative, and the interaction with the receiver odd, because this person was unresponsive to their input. We advise future researchers who attempt to elicit gossip in a laboratory setting to find a balance between the target's behavior, which needs to be unusual or antinormative in order to elicit gossip among other participants, and the realism of the experimental paradigm, where unlikely behavior or strange situations will raise participants' concerns about deception (for a recent report see Study 5 in Reynolds et al., 2018). As such, future research should further develop experimental gossip paradigms. Because gossip is usually shared between people who belong to the same group or social network (Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004; Mills, 2010), we believe that including confederates or participants who know each other or have a shared background may help elicit gossip in a laboratory setting. Furthermore, studying gossip in naturalistic settings might help validate laboratory findings, for example by using covert observation (e.g. Dunbar et al., 1997), experience sampling (Waddington & Fletcher, 2005), or critical incident reports (e.g. Baumeister et al., 2004).

We conceptualized power in relational and relative terms (i.e., upward, equal, downward) but could not examine the influence of the absolute level of power of people within a gossip dyad, due to limitations related to the receiver power manipulation in Study 1. An

interesting follow-up of our research would be to compare gossip between high power equals and low power equals, to investigate whether people from different hierarchical power levels have different gossip patterns with their peers. A potential difference is, for example, that peers in low power roles, who are likely to feel more vulnerable to threats and to behave in communal ways (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Keltner et al., 2003; Rucker, Galinsky, & Dubois, 2012), would benefit more from social support, whereas people in high power roles may benefit more from seeking information from their peers, which would allow them to accumulate knowledge about opportunities and to pursue new rewards. Furthermore, the setup of our current studies did not allow us to investigate the relative power differences between interaction partners. For example, one may experience a relatively small power difference in relation to direct superiors, and higher power difference from more distant superiors, who are at the top of the power hierarchy. Thus, future research may investigate whether relative differences in power or the type of power relationship are stronger predictors of gossip behavior.

In the current studies we operationalized power relationships as hierarchical, legitimate, and stable differences in expertise and control over resources and outcomes. However, in organizations, power relationships between individuals might be subtler, or even differ across domains of expertise. As such, it might be interesting for future research to investigate whether subjectively perceived power differences activate specific gossip motives, and whether illegitimate or unstable power relationships change our observed pattern of results.

Because gossip is a social phenomenon that involves at least three parties, the sender, receiver, and target of gossip, power relationships with the target are likely to be important as well in spreading gossip. For example, some empirical evidence shows that individuals are particularly interested in gossip about others of higher status and power, possibly due to their functional dependence on them (Ellwardt, Wittek et al., 2012; McAndrew et al., 2007; Noon & Delbridge, 1993; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Future research should clarify how power relationships with gossip targets influence gossip behavior.

Although we believe our predictions would hold for both positive and negative gossip, in this work we focused on negative gossip motives and behavior, for which hierarchical power relationships are likely to have stronger effects. Negative gossip is socially undesirable and is less likely to circulate freely through one's network than positive gossip, because it may damage targets' reputation and well-being; furthermore, engaging in negative gossip is associated with risks because it can result in retaliation from targets, mistrust from one's interaction partners, or social exclusion and stigma (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2012; Burt, 2008; Ellwardt, Labianca et al., 2012; Ellwardt, Wittek et al., 2012; Wert & Salovey, 2004). Consequently, negative social information is a scarce resource, and its exchange entails risks, whereas positive information is a less strategic social exchange resource, and people have fewer concerns about sharing it. As such, people may have a higher motive to seek and validate negative compared to positive information through gossip, which can be achieved by gossiping with peers (rather than with superiors or subordinates). Similarly, people may be more inclined to seek support from peers through negative rather than positive gossip (see also Bosson et al., 2006). Furthermore, because negative information is perceived as more diagnostic and has a stronger impact on perceptions than positive information (Baumeister et al., 2001), people may be more inclined to exert upward influence through negative rather than positive gossip. Thus, future research should investigate whether power relationships are indeed less likely to shape the pursuit of information, influence, and support through positive compared to negative gossip.

Furthermore, positive and negative gossip motives and behavior might vary depending on the tie strength between gossipers. Research on word of mouth suggests that people promote themselves to strangers by sharing their positive experiences with products or services but share negative experiences with closer acquaintances in order to protect them

(De Angelis, Bonezzi, Peluso, Rucker, & Costabile, 2012; Dubois, Bonezzi, & De Angelis, 2016). Drawing from these insights, it is possible that people engage in more positive gossip with new acquaintances than with partners in closer relationships (see also Ellwardt, Labianca et al., 2012). Furthermore, tie strength may regulate how different motives drive positive and negative gossip. For example, exerting upward influence towards a new superior may be easier by initially engaging in positive gossip and gradually introducing negative gossip as the relationship progresses. Future research should investigate the role of power relationships and tie strength in predicting positive and negative gossip behavior.

Lastly, this research showed that hierarchical power relationships between individuals affect their gossip behavior. However, other factors may interact with hierarchical power relationships to facilitate gossip, such as hierarchical structure of organizations (Foster, 2004), organizational change (Mills, 2010), breaches of trust (Ellwardt, Wittek et al., 2012), competitive environments (Kniffin & Wilson, 2005), interdependence between individuals, or monotonous tasks. It would be interesting to further examine how these factors may moderate the effects of power on gossip behavior.

7. Conclusion

Our research shows that power relationships between people shape their motives and gossip behaviors. In downward interactions, people have little to gain from gossip, and prefer to avoid this type of communication. However, gossip is more frequent and elaborate in lateral and upward interactions than in downward interactions. Lateral gossip helps people seek information and support from others, whereas upward gossip helps people exert informal influence. Thus, gossip is a functional behavior that enables individuals to exchange valued resources, depending on the power relationship with their interaction partners. Given the prevalence of gossip as a form of (organizational) communication, it is important to understand how and why people gossip.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our anonymous reviewers and editor, and Dr. Laetitia Mulder for their help in developing this paper. We are grateful to Donika Atanasova, Juan Peng, Leander Potze, Angeliki Ramnali, and Michelle Alice Van Breemen-Schneider for their help with data collection and coding.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2019.05.006>.

References

- Amabile, T. M. (1983). Brilliant but cruel: Perceptions of negative evaluators. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 19, 146–156.
- Anderson, C., & Brion, S. (2014). Perspectives on power in organizations. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 1, 67–97.
- Anderson, C., & Galinsky, A. (2006). Power, optimism, and risk-taking. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 36, 511–536.
- Baldwin, D. (1978). Power and social exchange. *The American Political Science Review*, 72, 1229–1242.
- Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 323–370.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117, 497–529.
- Baumeister, R. F., Zhang, L., & Vohs, K. D. (2004). Gossip as cultural learning. *Review of General Psychology*, 8, 111–121.
- Beersma, B., & van Kleef, G. A. (2011). How the grapevine keeps you in line: Gossip increases contributions to the group. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2, 642–649.
- Beersma, B., & Van Kleef, G. A. (2012). Why people gossip: An empirical analysis of social motives, antecedents, and consequences. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 42, 2640–2670.
- Ben-Ze'ev, A. (1994). The vindication of gossip. In R. F. Goodman, & A. Ben-Ze'ev (Eds.). *Good gossip* (pp. 11–24). Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- Berger, J. (2014). Word-of-mouth and interpersonal communication: An organizing framework and directions for future research. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 24, 586–607.
- Bergmann, J. R. (1993). *Discreet indiscretions: The social organization of gossip*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Blau, Peter M. (1964). *Exchange and power in social life*. New York: Wiley.
- Bosson, J. K., Johnson, A. B., Niederhoffer, K., & Swann, W. B., Jr. (2006). Interpersonal chemistry through negativity: Bonding by sharing negative attitudes about others. *Personal Relationships*, 13, 135–150.
- Burt, R. S. (2008). Gossip and Reputation. In M. Lecoutre, & P. Lièvre (Eds.). *Management Et Réseaux Sociaux: Ressource Pour L'action Ou Outil de Gestion?* (pp. 27–42). Paris: Hermès Science Publications Press.
- Case, C. R., Conlon, K. E., & Maner, J. K. (2015). Affiliation-seeking among the powerless: Lacking power increases social affiliative motivation. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 45, 378–385.
- Clegg, S. R., & van Ierssen, A. (2009). Dishing the dirt: Gossiping in organizations. *Culture and Organization*, 15, 275–289.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(Supplement), S95–S120.
- Cropanzano, R., & Mitchell, M. S. (2005). Social exchange theory: An interdisciplinary review. *Journal of Management*, 31, 874–900.
- De Angelis, M., Bonezzi, A., Peluso, A., Rucker, D., & Costabile, M. (2012). On braggarts and gossips: A self-enhancement account of word-of-mouth generation and transmission. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 49, 551–563.
- Dubois, D., Bonezzi, A., & De Angelis, M. (2016). Sharing with friends versus strangers: How interpersonal closeness influences word-of-mouth valence. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 53, 712–727.
- Dunbar, R. I. M. (2004). Gossip in an evolutionary perspective. *Review of General Psychology*, 8, 100–110.
- Dunbar, R. I. M., Duncan, N. D. C., & Marriott, A. (1997). Human conversational behavior. *Human Nature*, 8, 231–246.
- Eder, D., & Enke, J. L. (1991). The structure of gossip: Opportunities and constraints on collective expression among adolescents. *American Sociological Review*, 56, 494–508.
- Ellwardt, L., Labianca, J., & Wittek, R. P. M. (2012). Who are the objects of positive and negative gossip at work? A social network perspective on workplace gossip. *Social Networks*, 34, 193–205.
- Ellwardt, L., Steglich, C., & Wittek, R. (2012). The co-evolution of gossip and friendship in workplace social networks. *Social Networks*, 34, 623–633.
- Ellwardt, L., Wittek, R., & Wielers, R. (2012). Talking about the boss: Effects of generalized and interpersonal trust on workplace gossip. *Group & Organization Management*, 37, 519–547.
- Emerson, R. M. (1962). Power-dependence relations. *American Sociological Review*, 27, 31–41.
- Emler, N. (1994). Gossip, reputation and social adaptation. In R. Goodman, & A. Ben Ze'ev (Eds.). *Good gossip* (pp. 117–133). Kansas: Kansas University Press.
- Fagenson-Eland, E. A., Marks, M. A., & Amendola, K. L. (1997). Perceptions of mentoring relationships. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 51, 29–42.
- Farley, S. D. (2011). Is gossip power? The inverse relationships between gossip, power, and likability. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 41, 574–579.
- Feinberg, M., Willer, R., Stellar, J., & Keltner, D. (2012). The virtues of gossip: Reputational information sharing as prosocial behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102, 1015–1030.
- Festinger, L., Cartwright, D., Barber, K., Fleischl, J., Gottsdanker, J., Keysen, A., & Leavitt, G. (1948). A study of a rumor: Its origin and spread. *Human Relations*, 1, 464–486.
- Fine, G. A., & Rosnow, R. L. (1978). Gossip, gossipers, gossiping. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 4, 161–168.
- Fiske, S. T., & Berdahl, J. (2007). Social power. In A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.). *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (pp. 678–692). New York: Guilford.
- Foa, U. G., & Foa, E. B. (1980). Resource theory: Interpersonal behavior as exchange. In K. J. Gergen, M. S. Greenberg, & R. H. Willis (Eds.). *Social exchange: Advances in theory and research*. New York: Plenum.
- Foster, E. K. (2004). Research on gossip: Taxonomy, methods, and future directions. *Review of General Psychology*, 8, 78–99.
- French, J. R. P., & Raven, B. (1959). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright (Ed.). *Studies in social power* (pp. 150–167). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.
- Galinsky, A. D., Magee, J. C., Gruenfeld, D. H., Whitson, J. A., & Liljenquist, K. A. (2008). Power reduces the press of the situation: Implications for creativity, conformity, and dissonance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95, 1450–1466.
- Gouldner, A. (1960). The Norm of reciprocity: A preliminary statement. *American Sociological Review*, 25, 161–178.
- Grosser, T. J., Lopez-Kidwell, V., & Labianca, G. (2010). A social network analysis of positive and negative gossip in organizational life. *Group & Organization Management*, 35, 177–212.
- Hall, J., & Watson, W. H. (1971). The effects of a normative intervention on group decision making. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 6, 27–32.
- Homans, G. C. (1961). *Social behavior: Its elementary forms*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Keltner, D., Gruenfeld, D. H., & Anderson, C. (2003). Power, approach, and inhibition. *Psychological Review*, 110, 265–284.
- Kipnis, D. (1972). Does power corrupt? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 24, 33–41.
- Kniffin, K. M., & Wilson, D. S. (2005). Utilities of gossip across organizational levels.

- Human Nature*, 16, 278–292.
- Kurland, N. B., & Pelled, L. H. (2000). Passing the word: Toward a model of gossip and power in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review*, 25, 428–439.
- Lammers, J., Galinsky, A. D., Gordijn, E. H., & Otten, S. (2008). Illegitimacy moderates the effects on power on approach. *Psychological Science*, 19, 558–564.
- Lammers, J., Galinsky, A. D., Gordijn, E. H., & Otten, S. (2012). Power increases social distance. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 3, 282–290.
- Lammers, J., Stoker, J. I., Rink, F., & Galinsky, A. D. (2016). To have control over or to be free from others? The desire for power reflects a need for autonomy. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 42, 498–512.
- LaRose, R., & Eastin, M. S. (2004). A social cognitive theory of internet uses and gratifications: Toward a model of media attendance. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 48, 358–377.
- Latham, G., & Pinder, C. (2005). Work motivation theory and research at the dawn of the twentyfirst century. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 56, 485–516.
- Magee, J., & Galinsky, A. (2008). Social hierarchy: The self-reinforcing nature of power and status. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 2, 351–398.
- Magee, J. C., & Smith, P. K. (2013). The social distance theory of power. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 17, 158–186.
- Martinescu, E., Janssen, O., & Nijstad, B. A. (2019). Emotional and behavioral responses to gossip about the self. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 2603.
- Martinescu, E., Janssen, O., & Nijstad, B. A. (2014). Tell me the gossip: The self-evaluative function of receiving gossip about others. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40, 1668–1680.
- McAndrew, F. T. (2014). The "sword of a woman": Gossip and female aggression. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 19, 196–199.
- McAndrew, F. T., Bell, E. K., & Garcia, C. M. (2007). Who do we tell, and whom do we tell on? Gossip as a strategy for status enhancement. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 37, 1562–1577.
- Mead, N. L., & Maner, J. K. (2012). On keeping your enemies close: Powerful leaders seek proximity to ingroup power threats. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102, 576–591.
- Miller, V. D., & Jablin, F. M. (1991). Information seeking during organizational entry: Influences, tactics, and a model of the process. *Academy of Management Review*, 16, 92–120.
- Mills, C. (2010). Experiencing gossip: The foundations for a theory of embedded organizational gossip. *Group & Organization Management*, 35, 213–240.
- Molm, L. (1991). Affect and social exchange: Satisfaction in power-dependence relationships. *American Sociological Review*, 56, 475–493.
- Molm, L., Peterson, G., & Takahashi, N. (1999). Power in negotiated and reciprocal exchange. *American Sociological Review*, 64, 876–890.
- Nicholson, N. (2001). The new word on gossip. *Psychology Today*, 41–45.
- Noon, M., & Delbridge, R. (1993). News from behind my hand: Gossip in organizations. *Organization Studies*, 14, 23–36.
- Paine, R. (1967). What is gossip about? An alternative hypothesis. *Man*, 2, 278–285.
- Peters, K., & Kashima, Y. (2007). From social talk to social action: Shaping the social triad with emotion sharing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93, 780–797.
- Peters, K., Kashima, Y., & Clark, A. (2009). Talking about others: Emotionality and the dissemination of social information. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 39, 207–222.
- Podolny, J. M. (2005). *Status signals: A sociological study of market competition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Preacher, K. J., Rucker, D. D., & Hayes, A. F. (2007). Addressing moderated mediation hypotheses: Theory, methods, and prescriptions. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, 42, 185–227.
- Reynolds, T., Baumeister, R. F., & Maner, J. K. (2018). Competitive reputation manipulation: Women strategically transmit social information about romantic rivals. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 78, 195–209.
- Rimé, B. (2009). Emotion elicits the social sharing of emotion: Theory and empirical review. *Emotion Review*, 1, 60–85.
- Rook, K. S. (1987). Social support versus companionship: Effects on life stress, loneliness, and evaluations by others. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 1132–1147.
- Rosnow, R. L. (2001). Rumor and gossip in interpersonal interaction and beyond: A social exchange perspective. In R. M. Kowalski (Ed.). *Behaving badly: Aversive behaviors in interpersonal relationships* (pp. 203–232). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Rucker, D. D., Galinsky, A., & Dubois, D. (2012). Power and consumer behavior: How power shapes who and what consumers value. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 22, 352–368.
- Scherer, C. W., & Cho, H. (2003). A social network contagion theory of risk perception. *Risk Analysis*, 23, 261–267.
- Schoeman, F. (1994). Gossip and privacy. In R. F. Goodman, & A. Ben-Ze'ev (Eds.). *Good gossip* (pp. 72–82). Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Scott, James C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sligte, D. J., de Dreu, C. K. W., & Nijstad, B. A. (2011). Power, stability of power, and creativity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 47, 891–897.
- Sommerfeld, R. D., Krambeck, H. J., & Milinski, M. (2008). Multiple gossip statements and their effect on reputation and trustworthiness. *Proceedings of the Royal Society B-Biological Sciences*, 275, 2529–2536.
- Stamkou, E., van Kleef, G., Homan, A., & Galinsky, A. (2016). How norm violations shape social hierarchies: Those who stand on top block norm violators from rising up. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 19, 608–629.
- Stirling, R. B. (1956). Some psychological mechanisms operative in gossip. *Social Forces*, 34, 262–267.
- Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2003). Temporal construal. *Psychological Review*, 110, 403–421.
- Van Kleef, G. A., De Dreu, C. K. W., Pietroni, D., & Manstead, A. S. R. (2006). Power and emotion in negotiation: Power moderates the interpersonal effects of anger and happiness on concession making. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 36, 557–581.
- Waddington, K., & Fletcher, C. (2005). Gossip and emotion in nursing and health-care organizations. *Journal of Health Organization and Management*, 19, 378–394.
- Waytz, A., Chou, E. Y., Magee, J. C., & Galinsky, A. D. (2015). Not so lonely at the top: The relationship between power and loneliness. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 130, 69–78.
- Wert, S. R., & Salovey, P. (2004). A social comparison account of gossip. *Review of General Psychology*, 8, 122–137.
- Witteck, R., & Wielers, R. (1998). Gossip in organizations. *Computational & Mathematical Organization Theory*, 4, 189–204.
- Wu, J., Balliet, D., & Van Lange, P. A. M. (2015). When does gossip promote generosity? Indirect reciprocity under the shadow of the future. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 6, 923–930.
- Wu, J., Balliet, D., & Van Lange, P. A. M. (2016). Reputation management: Why and how gossip enhances generosity. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 37, 193–201.